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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001531

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: ETHNIC CONFLICT IN NASARAWA PEACEFUL NOW,
BUT VERY TENSE

REF: ABUJA 1461

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter, reason 1.5 (B/D).

11. (U) Summary. Ethnic clashes in the Middle-Belt State of Nasarawa appear to have halted for the moment, although tension throughout the state is running high. The federal government has sent additional security forces into troubled areas. Approximately 40,000 displaced persons, mainly Tivs, have fled to neighboring Benue State. Most have moved in with friends and family, with about 4,000 accommodated in two camps north of the capital city of Makurdi. Displaced persons, mainly Hausa-speakers, have fled to Lafia, capital of Nasarawa, with 3,000 now at a converted primary school. Both Nasarawa and Benue State governments have responded quickly to the evolving situation, earning praise from International Red Cross (IRC) officials. The IRC will mobilize from its depot in Lagos, providing non-food items (blankets, cooking sets, soap, etc.). Governor Adamu of Nasarawa and Governor Akume of Benue will jointly convene a meeting of elected and traditional leaders June 29 to continue efforts at reconciliation, and encourage displaced persons to return home. End summary.

12. (C) Conflicting reports continue of clashes between rival ethnic groups in the southeast corner of Nasarawa State, a Middle-Belt State located immediately to the east of the Federal Capital Territory. Nasarawa Deputy Governor Onje Gye-Wado told Poloff June 29 that the situation throughout the state was "extremely tense." According to the Deputy Governor, no confirmed clashes had occurred in the last 48 hours, although he noted it was very difficult to secure accurate information from remote villages in the south-east corner of the state. A number of villages in the three Local Government Areas now the scene of the conflict (Awe, Obi, and Keana) had been entirely abandoned by their residents, he said. Additional security forces had been requested from the Federal Government, said Gye-Wado, and they now maintained a "very uneasy" peace. Reached by telephone June 28, the Deputy Police Commissioner for Federal Operations confirmed the dispatch of a fourth mobile police unit from the Federal Capital Territory to Nasarawa, as well as the reassignment of mobile police units from Jigawa, Anambra and Enugu States. The police official said the mobile units were "in charge" of the situation, following clashes earlier in the week which left three police officers dead.

13. (C) Poloff also reached Governor George Akume of Benue State June 28. Governor Akume spoke at some length on the plight of ethnic Tivs fleeing from Nasarawa (Akume is himself a Tiv, as are the majority of Benue State citizens). He emphasized several times the importance of establishing a firm peace and coaxing displaced persons to return to their homes. "This is planting season, and the Tivs who have left are mainly farmers. They need to care for their lands." Akume confirmed continuing efforts by the Nasarawa and Benue governments to mediate between the rival ethnic groups (Tivs, Jukuns, Hausa-speakers, and Kwala). A meeting had been set for June 29 of elected and traditional leadership of both States in Lafia to discuss the situation, he said. He said that the IRC and Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) had been on the scene and assisting State officials with arriving villagers, and he expected help from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA).

14. (C) Head of the International Red Cross in Nigeria Jean-Jacques Gacond told Poloff June 29 that approximately 40,000 displaced persons, mainly Tivs, had fled Nasarawa State into Benue State to the south. About 4,000 of them were now residing at two camps north of Makurdi, at Dauda and Uikpam. The rest of the arriving villagers, registered at an initial transit point, had found refuge with family and friends in the area. Gacond said that State government officials had done "fairly well" under the circumstances in quickly accommodating the displaced villagers. He noted that adequate food and water was on hand for the arrivals, but there were shortages of certain items such as blankets, cooking sets, and soap. Sanitation could also be "improved,"

he said. The IRC would mobilize from its Lagos depot he added, sending items that were lacking. Gacond also said that about 3,000 displaced villagers, mainly Hausa-speakers, had arrived in Lafia in Nasarawa, and were now residing at a converted primary school. The Nasarawa State government, he said, had also reacted quickly and was adequately caring for the arrivals. He estimated that, as in Makurdi, a number of arriving villagers had moved in with family and friends, but he had no hard figures. The main State hospital in Lafia had also been coping well with villagers injured in the latest round of reprisal attacks over the previous week-end (particularly disturbing, said Gacond, were the several dozen women and children injured in the assaults, many bearing knife and machete wounds). Overall, he said, the two governments had done a much better job in dealing with the sudden influx of displaced persons than Kaduna State in February of last year (when tens of thousands of people fled Kaduna during religious riots).

15. (C) Comment. Bitter conflict over land and community status in Nasarawa, as noted reftel, has led to nearly 50,000 villagers fleeing the areas of actual fighting, most of them ethnic Tivs. Most have found friends and family to assist them, and the rest have been accommodated by State Governments reacting quickly to the crisis. (We note, in passing, the equally generous reception the federal government gave to the Ulnar at Apapa Port in Lagos earlier this week. Never shy to report in our cables on Nigeria's various failings, we see two positive examples this week of Nigerian government in action). Efforts by the two State Governments to calm the various communities, and coax frightened villagers to return to their communities, will be difficult. End comment.
Jeter